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Further Reflections on Academic Faithfulness: A Reply to Friendly Critics

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Abstract: I respond to essays by Michael Austin, Greg Ganssle, Richard Davis, and David Naugle as they interact with my model of faith-scholarship integration.

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in a symposium gathered around my essay on academic faithfulness.¹ I believe this is an important topic Christian scholars ought to engage with sustained attention. It is *not* business as usual in the academy. The eternal destiny of many is at stake. The plausibility of the Gospel is at stake. Whether or not the Gospel gets a fair hearing is largely informed by the collective mindset, value system, and imagination of our culture—much of which is incubated within and propagated from the modern university. Those of us who are called by God to be scholars are missionaries to one of the most difficult and important mission fields.

In this essay, I respond to my fellow symposium contributors. I consider each a friend and have learned a great deal from them. It is a joy to know there are those like Austin, Ganssle, Davis, and Naugle who seek to integrate all of their lives, including their scholarship, under the banner of Christ. All of them have been kind to me, sharing what they deem positive yet raising their worries with my model of faith-scholarship integration. I welcome their feedback. It sharpens me (Proverbs 27:17), pushes me toward greater clarity, and keeps me humble! I shall respond in what follows to each of their essays in turn.

Reply to Mike Austin

Mike Austin's essay, "Scholarship and Character as a Christian Academic," explores the importance of character in teaching, shows how a Christological approach to scholarship can elucidate the virtue of humility, and highlights the fact that our guiding principles may sometimes be made explicit and at other

¹ Paul Gould, "An Essay on Academic Disciplines, Faithfulness, and the Christian Scholar." Available here: http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/file/Gould_Essay-on-academic-disciplines-faithfulness.pdf

times remain latent, depending on context.² To all of this I say, “Amen!” Elsewhere I’ve argued that a Christian scholar may engage in three kinds of scholarship: explicit, latent, and purely vocational, all of which can be manifestations of faithfulness in the academy.³ Given the fact that there is nothing within Mike’s essay in which I find disagreement, I shall not comment further on his excellent essay.

Reply to Greg Ganssle

Similarly, Greg Ganssle offers further elaboration of my central insights instead of critical commentary. He notes that my list of four guiding principles can, in fact, be expanded to eight. In my original essay, I offer the following principles as a foundation, grounded in the triune God, for scholarship:

Unity Thesis (UT): All truth is connected and unified.

Objectivity Thesis (OT): There is a mind independent reality that we can discover.

Scripture Thesis (ST): Scripture makes knowledge claims about the nature of God, the world and the self.

Gospel Thesis (GT): Humanity’s greatest need is the gospel.

To these, Greg adds a *Knowledge Thesis* (the world is knowable, and human beings can know it), a *Value Thesis* (reality is good and beautiful and worth exploring), a *Teleological Thesis* (reality is purposive and moral), a *Missional Thesis* (God calls all his people and all their work into his redemptive mission—both through witness bearing and through image bearing), a *Personal Thesis* (the most fundamental reality in the universe is a person), and a *Relational Thesis* (the most fundamental reality is in relationship).⁴ I take it that the more fine-grained picture offered by Greg is a perfectly acceptable elaboration of my original four guiding principles. In fact, I think that all of the additional theses offered by Greg are entailed by one or more of the original four, and they do indeed help the Christian scholar picture “the breadth of ways in which the existence and

² Mike Austin, “Scholarship and Character as a Christian Academic,” Available here: http://epsociety.org/userfiles/Austin-Scholarship%20and%20Character%20as%20a%20Christian%20Academic_Edited_DCS.pdf

³ Paul M. Gould, “The Two Tasks Introduced: The Fully Integrated Life of the Christian Scholar,” in *The Two Tasks of the Christian Scholar*, eds. William Lane Craig and Paul M. Gould (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), pp. 41–46.

⁴ Greg Ganssle, “Some Reflections on the Task of the Christian Scholar,” p. 3. Available here: [http://epsociety.org/userfiles/Ganssle%20\(ReflectionsOnGould\).pdf](http://epsociety.org/userfiles/Ganssle%20(ReflectionsOnGould).pdf)

nature of God grounds the very principles that make robust Christian scholarship possible.”⁵

I have a minor quibble regarding Greg’s modifications to my model of the anatomy of an academic discipline. Greg suggests that the bottom floor is composed of the “Grand Story of Reality and of the Discipline” (instead of my “Guiding Principles”) and the top level ought to be relabeled “Theories and Truth Claims” (instead of my “A Guiding Narrative”). The reason for the change is that “the Grand Story is at the foundation of the discipline . . . [and what] is at the top is the output.”⁶ It is true that man is a narrational creature, finding meaning and identity within some grand story (Christianity, naturalism, postmodernism, consumerism, or American Dream, to name a few).⁷ Still, it is not clear to me that these grand stories within which we locate our lives (and that function within an academic discipline as the guiding narrative) are givens at the front end of inquiry. They are too broad, too all-encompassing. For example, it is not the grand story of naturalism itself that functions as a guiding principle within many of the scientific disciplines, but individual theses that are consistent with (and together entail) naturalism that are operative at the foundational level: scientism, materialism, nihilism, etc. The grand story of naturalism, it seems to me, is the product of reflective equilibrium, based on these prior guiding principles.⁸ If, as Greg notes, “what is at the top is the output,” then I think “A Guiding Narrative,” which includes the theories and truth claims (historical and contemporary) as well as these grand stories is the best description of the top level. It is important also to note that “output” is not only found at the top level. Guiding principles, methodologies, and even the aspects of the data set within an academic discipline are products of the academic discipline itself, even if they are so often (today) uncritically accepted as givens.

I wholeheartedly endorse Greg’s idea of bringing the “Gospel Lens” into

⁵ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

⁷ See Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), p. 24, where it is argued we are storytelling animals who “experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends.”

⁸ My point is further supported by the fact that there is rigorous debate, e.g., on whether the grand story of naturalism is to be understood as an ontological or epistemological claim. See Owen Flanagan, “Varieties of Naturalism,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, edited by Philip Clayton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 430–52. The principles are more basic than the overarching story itself, and the story changes (ever so slightly) based on which principles are given pride of place. Thanks to Chad Meeks for drawing my attention to this debate.

conversation with one's academic discipline and his insight that the anatomy of an academic discipline can also serve as a helpful guide to understanding an individual's beliefs and pressing concerns. Moreover, his two horizons, or perspectives, from which to consider the scholarly enterprise provide us with a nice diagnostic tool for determining which research projects are most pressing given our limited time and energy.

Reply to Rich Davis

I fear Rich Davis has misunderstood my position. He worries that my *Perspectival Factualism* (hereafter, PF) entails that there is no “objective, paradigm-independent way of adjudicating” conflicting claims to the mantle of truth.⁹ Rich suggests that PF entails the following:

SHAPE: The activities and deliverances of a scholarly discipline are shaped by the perspective or “narrative identity” that forms the culture of that discipline.

ACCESS: Each perspective or “narrative identity” provides unique cognitive access to and an interpretation of the facts.¹⁰

He says that unless SHAPE and ACCESS are given “some surgical fine-tuning,” then those who endorse PF cannot rationally assess rival paradigms and the prospects for a missionary encounter within an academic discipline is greatly diminished.¹¹ “Taken together, then, what SHAPE and ACCESS seem to imply is that all disciplinary knowledge claims are paradigm-dependent.”¹² That result, if true, would indeed be devastating to my overall goal. Fortunately, I don't think that PF prohibits objective (factual) criteria for paradigm choice, the possibility of rational assessment between rival paradigms, or access to “facts as they stand apart”¹³ from one's perspective.

We can begin to see our way out of the woods by noting that there are (at least) two possible senses of “interpreted fact,” only one of which is devastating to my position. Consider:

⁹ Richard Davis, “A Perspective on Perspectival Factualism: Response to Paul Gould,” p. 5. Available here: [http://epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Davis-Perspect%20Factualism%20\(final-073115\).pdf](http://epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Davis-Perspect%20Factualism%20(final-073115).pdf)

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Ibid., p. 3.

¹³ Ibid.

INTERPRETED FACT₁: Fact F is an interpreted fact if and only if F is a mind-independent feature of reality discovered by a (human) knower.

INTERPRETED FACT₂: Fact F is an interpreted fact if and only if F is a paradigm-dependent fact discovered by a (human) knower.

I wish to endorse a version of metaphysical realism. There is a “world ready-made”¹⁴ independent of our conceptual schemes. INTERPRETED FACT₁ can be understood as a version of metaphysical realism, whereas INTERPRETED FACT₂ can be understood as a version of metaphysical anti-realism. Obviously, only the second sense of “interpreted fact” has the devastating consequences to PF that worry Rich. I reject INTERPRETED FACT₂. There is no such thing in the ready-made world as a “paradigm dependent fact.” As Reinhardt Grossman puts it, “if there were no judgments, no beliefs, no assertions, there would be no truth or falsehood, but there would still exist facts.”¹⁵ All I mean to convey with ACCESS (as Rich describes it and as I understand it given INTERPRETED FACT₁) is that we humans are not disinterested cognizers. We access reality from the perspective of our own biases, beliefs, and values. Given SHAPE, this should cause us to pause before we proclaim certainty about many of our beliefs. This is not inconsistent with a firm confidence that we possess the truth. When we access facts, we access the ready-made world. It is not ours to construct. Thus, I accept Rich’s GP1-6 and argue that PF can accommodate all of these principles.

I think the mistake began with Rich’s reading of my treatment of Bacon (and he brings in Isaac Watts as another witness). He says,

I’m fairly confident that Bacon and Watts would not have denied the existence of “a variety of perspectives” within their respective scholarly communities. . . . If Bacon and Watts were naïve, it certainly wasn’t because they were blind to the presence of conflicting perspectives inside the academy.¹⁶

¹⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The world ready-made,” in *Practices of Belief: Selected Essays*, Volume 2, ed. by Terence Cuneo (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 1. See also, “Does the role of concepts make experiential access to ready-made reality impossible?” in *ibid*, chapter 2, for more on the mind’s relationship to the world as well as the relationship between concepts and facts.

¹⁵ Reinhardt Grossman, *The Existence of the World* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 74.

¹⁶ Davis, “A Perspective on Perspectival Factualism: Response to Paul Gould,” pp. 2–3.

I completely agree. But PF is consistent with the presence of conflicting perspectives with respect to truth claims and theories within the academy. In fact, it ensures that we will have them! The “variety of perspectives” in view with PF has to do with our posture as we begin the academic enterprise, not with the fact that there will be competing and conflicting outputs to the scholarly enterprise. It is the denial that there is such a thing as generic human beings who can approach the ready-made world from a disinterested perspective, something that (at least) Bacon thought was possible.

Reply to David Naugle

Professor David Naugle begins by noting seven positive things he finds in my essay.¹⁷ I concur with all seven! He then notes that my position seems inconsistent, truncated, and unrealistic (how hard the fall after being so built up!). His worries provide me an opportunity to clarify important distinctions. First, David notes that I argue Christians should be “principled pluralists” in the academy, a position with which he agrees.¹⁸ He then notes I argue we are after truth. As such, “conversion is the ultimate desideratum”¹⁹ and my position harbors a potential conflict. The resolution is simplicity itself. Distinguish between academic disciples (and the academy more generally) and individuals within academic disciplines (and the academy more generally). We are to be principled pluralists with respect to our academic disciplines (and the academy in general), yet seek to win individuals within (and without) the academy to Christ. This distinction allows us to hold in tension the fact that Christianity is true, and thus we desire all people to repent and come to Christ, and the fact that we live in a fallen world, and thus a complete reconstruction of the academy along Christian lines is neither realistic nor necessary (as I argue in my lead essay). Moreover, while we seek the conversion of all individuals who do not belong to Christ, this is not our ultimate desideratum, as I shall discuss below.

Second, David argues that my claim to offer a truly holistic account of faith and scholarship integration is not holistic enough.²⁰ I don’t tell readers *how* to integrate their faith with scholarship, nor do I, at least in the lead essay, integrate my model with the Biblical narrative. David then goes on to detail key

¹⁷ David Naugle, “Reflections on Gould’s Model of Faith and Scholarship: Consistent, Holistic, and Realistic?” Available here: [http://epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Naugle%20\(Response%20to%20PGould-061715\).pdf](http://epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Naugle%20(Response%20to%20PGould-061715).pdf)

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰ Ibid.

movements within the plotline of Scripture and provide helpful insights on how each of these is relevant to the task of integration. In reply, I do think my proposal is holistic, just not worked out in sufficient detail in the lead essay. I offered as a guiding principle ST, the *Scripture Thesis*, which should tip off the reader to the importance of the Biblical narrative to the *cognitive content* of Scripture for faith-scholarship integration. In fact, in the book from which this essay is an excerpt, I include an entire chapter on “Locating Your Story Within God’s Story,” in which I explore how the Biblical doctrines of creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration impact the scholarly enterprise.²¹ So, while I agree that much needs to be filled in by individual scholars as they apply my model to their own situation, I disagree with David’s claim that my model is not holistic. It is precisely holistic because it incorporates the Biblical narrative, including the often-neglected area of mission. I do not, moreover, see how pietism lies “closely at the door”²² of my model, although I’d count it as a partial success if more of us (myself included) paid more attention to the life of our soul and less to our academic status.

Finally, David worries that the transformation I seek through the missional vision is unrealistic.²³ Change takes place only by the grace of God. To this I say a hearty, “Amen.” The locus of my essay was not on God’s role in the missional picture. David is surely correct that we will see transformation of an academic discipline or the conversion of individuals only by the grace of God. Rather, what I am concerned with is our responsibility. We are to be *faithful*. This is why conversion is not the ultimate desideratum, nor is transformation. Our goal is faithfulness. And, Lord willing, as we are faithful witnesses within the academy, we will see, by the grace of God, lives changed and the academy transformed so that the Gospel will be seen as plausible in the market place of ideas. May we all be faithful witnesses for Christ.²⁴

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²¹ Paul M. Gould, *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), ch. 2. See also my “The Two Tasks Introduced,” pp. 31–40.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

²⁴ Thanks to Chad Meeks and R. Keith Loftin for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.